

## ELEMENTARY ESSAY #1



Volunteer Park, circa 1912. [Courtesy Museum of History & Industry.](#)

**B**y the beginning of the 20th century Seattle had become a large city. In only 50 years, it had grown from a group of pioneer cabins to a city of nearly 100,000 people. Money earned from the Klondike Gold Rush had helped to build many new businesses and homes. Seattle was now one of the most important cities on the West Coast.

The people of Seattle and King County were very proud to live and work in an area surrounded by so much natural beauty. By 1903, the city had already established five major public parks --Den-ny, Kinnear, Volunteer, Washington, and Woodland. City leaders

wanted everyone to be able to enjoy the grand scenery and peaceful surroundings. Soon the Seattle City Council decided that there should be an even more complete set of parks for the growing city. They hired the Olmsted Brothers, a landscape architecture firm from Brookline, Massachusetts, to help plan the project. The Olmsteds were well-known in their field. Along with Frederick Law Olmsted Sr., they had developed several important parks, such as New York's Central Park, the Capitol grounds in Washington D.C., and Portland, Oregon's park system.

John Charles Olmsted was the firm's senior partner. He came to Seattle soon after he was hired to conduct a survey. He and his assistant, Percy Jones, explored the city by horse, trolley, foot, and boat. While he was away from his family, Olmsted often wrote letters to his wife Sophie and told her of the wonderful natural resources of this region. In his letters, he also described what he wanted the citizens of Seattle to be able to see and appreciate from different parts of the city. When he was done with his survey, Olmsted prepared a detailed plan for the park system of Seattle. He made sure to include all the points that he had written about in his letters home.

In his report, Olmsted urged the city to obtain as much land as possible. He wanted to make sure that it could be shared by all those who lived in, worked in, or visited Seattle. He wrote that it was key that this land be on or near every different body of water found within the city limits. He was afraid that all of the most valuable land would be purchased by wealthy persons to build their homes. Another important point he made in his report to the city was that

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the parks should include playgrounds. Olmsted recommended that the city develop a park within one-half mile of every home in Seattle. He wanted young children and women with babies to have a park near their houses. He planned for outdoor equipment to be built in the parks for older boys and girls.

Olmsted told the city council that every park should be different. He designed each one to take advantage of the individual natural resources and views that he noticed when he selected the park location. The Olmsted park and boulevard system was planned so that the parks and boulevards would be connected along 20 miles of shoreline. This route included parks on Seattle's major lakes (Green Lake, Lake Washington, and Lake Union) as well as on Puget Sound. Olmsted also agreed with the city's plans for a ship canal that would lower the water in Lake Washington by several feet. He knew that this would create more shoreline land for parks.

Over a thirty-year time period, the Olmsted Brothers firm designed 37 parks and playfields for the City of Seattle. During this time, they also designed over 200 gardens for private property owners in the Northwest. Olmsted also designed the beautiful landscaping on the University of Washington campus for the 1909 world's fair held in Seattle – the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition. Visitors to the fair from all around the world were impressed by the beautiful scenery that surrounded the host city.

Today's citizens and visitors to Seattle have much to be grateful to the Olmsted Brothers for. Over 100 years ago, they thought ahead

for future generations and planned a system of parks and boulevards that lets everyone enjoy the amazing views of the mountains, water, and forests that surround our city.

This essay was developed using facts and terminology from the following HistoryLink.org essays:

- **1124** [Olmsted Parks in Seattle](#)
- **3290** [John Olmsted arrives in Seattle to design city parks on April 30, 1903.](#)
- **3490** [Seattle's Washington Park Arboretum is established on December 6, 1934](#)
- **7054** [Olmsted Park Plans for Seattle Cybertour](#)
- **8873** [Alaska-Yukon-Pacific-Exposition \(1909\)](#)
- **8939** [Regents of the University of Washington approve Olmsted's plan for the A-Y-P-E on May 17, 1907](#)

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**Advantage :** a better chance, an edge

**Boulevard :** a wide street with trees down the middle or along the sides

**Campus :** land and buildings of a school

**Conduct:** do

**Connected:** joined

**Current:** now

**Detailed :** very specific

**Individual:** one; a single thing or person

**Install:** put in

**Key:** important

**Landscape:** the land that you can see from one viewpoint

Landscape Architectural Firm: a group of people who design landscape plans for the area around buildings and in open spaces and parks

**Peaceful:** calm

**Pioneer:** a person who comes first

**Region:** area

**Route:** a way to get somewhere, like a road or a trail

**Scenery:** a view, like a beautiful painting

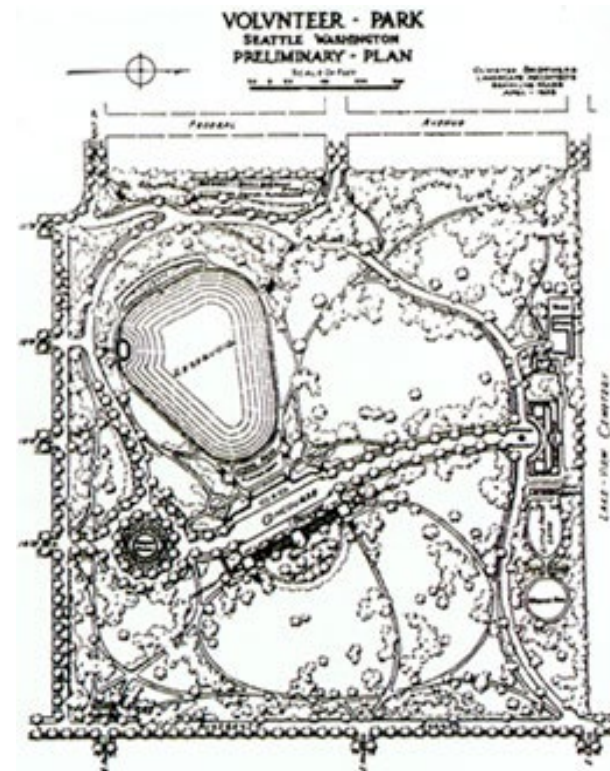
**Senior:** oldest

**Surround:** to be all around

**Survey:** a record of something

**Trolley:** a wheeled vehicle that carries passengers like a bus and runs on electricity

**Valuable:** worth a lot of money



Preliminary plan for Olmsted-designed Volunteer Park, Seattle.  
Courtesy [Friends of Olmsted Parks](#)